



# Shame in the house of Freud

## PENNY SIOPIS

### BIOGRAPHY

Penny Siopis is an artist and researcher who lives and works in Cape Town. Her work covers a wide range of media and practices, including painting, installation and video. She has exhibited extensively in South Africa and beyond, most recently in her participation in the *Sydney Biennale*, 2010. For many years she taught Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and she is currently Honorary Professor at Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town.



**Fig. 1.** Penny Siopis at Freud's desk in the Freud Museum, London. 2005. Photograph by Rose Jones. Courtesy of Penny Siopis and the Freud Museum.

I describe here an instance in my creative work suggestive of some questions underpinning practice-led research in the visual arts. The instance involved my making an exhibition and writing an academic article. Both the exhibition and the article were responses to an invitation to reflect on the publication of Sigmund Freud's *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (1905). The occasion was the centenary celebrations of the publication in 2005. This context offered me a particularly intense experience of the interplay between theory and practice. My exhibition, on which I focus here, was titled *Three essays on shame* and was held at the Freud Museum in London in that year. The museum is the house where Freud lived and practiced after he fled Nazi Vienna in 1938 and where he relocated his study/consulting room with its famous couch and collection of antiquities. The article titled 'Shame in three parts in the Freud Museum', and which I draw on in this paper, was published in 2008 (Siopis 2008).

Why the interplay of theory and practice was so intense in my project was that being in the Freud Museum and re-reading his texts from that 'space' made it possible to engage abstract theorisation and concrete situated experience in powerful relation. This stimulated new ways for me to continue my ongoing creative exploration of shame.

For me, the relationship between theory and practice is intricate and dynamic. In the visual arts, at least, practice is commonly understood as creative work and theory as systematic thought in the form of writing. But ideally both are practices. Definitions aside; what seems to be the bugbear in the context of the colloquium, *Integrating approaches to practice-led research in art and design*, held at the University of Johannesburg in October 2009, is getting practice/creative work formally acknowledged and valued as research in its own right in universities. Whether we call this enquiry 'research' or not is to my mind academic. The challenge in this quest for acknowledgement and value is to resist making practice/creative work the handmaiden of legitimating theory. Needless to say, it is also crucial to resist arrogating to creative work unwarranted transcendental primacy – although this seems less a risk these days. What is vitally important for me, though, is *criticality* in creative practice. In this respect I experienced the extended theoretical elaborations of the 1980's and early 1990's to be a liberating force. But this force has now weakened into stultifying orthodoxy. There have been a few significant reactions to this situation. An example would be the art critical writing of Nigel Whiteley.

Whiteley (1999) argues for a 'critical looking' at visual art which involves an intense regard to the 'form' of the work – something he suggests has been overlooked in the all too dominant 'textualist' interpretations of art which focus on 'meaning'. Interventions such as Whiteley's might well be of interest to practice-led research (PLR) if indeed PLR keeps alive to what I see as its promise; that is, to pay particular attention to the distinctiveness and particularity of the art itself – be it object, event, situation, performance. In attending to a work's specific mediations, its materialities and other 'formal' qualities – as much as it's 'textual' meanings – we might keep alive the complexity and richness of the relationship between theory and practice, and between visual material and writing which is at the heart of critical creative practice.

I now turn to my Freud project. The exhibition was a site-specific intervention of paintings, film, sound pieces and found objects. A pivotal figure in both the exhibition and the article was an ancient Greco-Egyptian terracotta fertility figurine in Freud's collection known as Baubo. Baubo has been generally overlooked in the literature on Freud's collection, but for me, she offered a profound opportunity to grapple with shame as a psycho-social phenomenon.

In classic psychoanalytic theory shame is rooted in early sexual development. Freud (1905:177) commented on shame in his *Three essays* as one of the three 'mental forces' – along with 'disgust' and 'the claims of aesthetic and moral ideals' – that function 'like dams', restricting our sexual instincts and enabling psycho-social growth. Still, Freud actually gave relatively scant attention to shame in his writings. This fact, and the opportunity of working in the Freud Museum itself, presented me with a challenge in materialising shame.

Freud's study – the 'birthplace' of psychoanalysis – was a good place to start my research. It contains over 2000 Greek, Egyptian, Roman, near-eastern and Asian artefacts that form Freud's collection of antiquities. They are piled on shelves, in cabinets and on his desk. Those on his desk are of noble ilk: a favourite being a bronze statuette of Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom and war. Freud caressed some of his objects as he wrote. "I must always have an object to love", he confessed to Jung (Freud cited by Burke 2006:2). I was able to handle his objects too and even lie on his couch. Feeling the surfaces and imbibing the atmosphere was as important to my research as reading his texts. It was in the shadowy recesses of his study that I discovered Baubo.

Baubo's presence in Freud's collection is a puzzle, with no sign of her in his inventory of purchases. Could her cheeky grin and gesture – one hand lifting her skirt to expose her genitals and the other pointing to the site of exposure – have put him off? Perhaps she was a gift linked with his obscure 1916 case study titled 'A mythological parallel to a visual obsession' in which an illustration of 'a Baubo' features. The illustration shows a simple line drawing of a female figure schematised as genitals – a 'V' shape on legs, simultaneously invoking a smile and perhaps an 'absent penis'. I was reminded here of Freud's essay *Femininity* where he considers shame to be "a feminine characteristic *par excellence*" (Freud 1933:430, emphasis in the original) and it was to this provocation that I responded.

Baubo is difficult to pin down in Greek mythology, but most agree that she was associated with childbirth and fecundity, and that she was "a ribald character symbolising humour and light-heartedness in the face of trouble" (Burke 2006:216). All accounts of Baubo suggest that she was a 'common' older woman with a bawdy bent who exposed herself to Demeter, the fertility goddess, to cheer her up. Demeter had been distraught because her daughter Persephone had been

abducted and raped by Hades and locked up in his underworld. Lifting her skirt, Baubo lifted Demeter's spirit to the point of laughter.

Quite why Demeter found Baubo's vagina funny is anyone's guess. There is however a dangerous power in the exposure of the vagina. As Catherine Blackledge (2003:8) notes, vaginas were reputedly less associated with taboo in ancient times than with heroic genitals that might, "[d]riv[e] out devils, [avert] vicious spirits, [frighten] carnivores and scar[e] opposing warriors". With Christianity and other formalised religions such a genital might become transfigured into shame.

For me, Baubo's self-exposure rests on a knife-edge between self-affirmation and negation, lying somewhere between agency and victimhood. In this it marks shame as a double bind. Jacqueline Rose (2003:1) captures this well when she writes, "[s]hame relies on the art of exposure, even if exposure is what it hates most, and most militantly struggles against".

Perhaps few would see anything positive in shame, as it involves extreme humiliation, psychological nakedness, traumatic loss of face, of voice. It is the



**Fig. 2.** Siopis, P. 2003-2005. 'Shame' painting series. Mixed media on paper. 18.5cm x 24.5cm. Courtesy of Penny Siopis and the Freud Museum.





**Fig. 3.** Siopis, P. 2005. Sound piece in Freud's study, part of site-specific installation *Three essays on shame*. Freud Museum, London. Photograph by Rose Jones. Courtesy of Penny Siopis and the Freud Museum.



**Fig. 4.** Siopis, P. 2005. Clay replica of Baubo, one of the objects in the cupboards in Freud's dining room. Detail of site-specific installation *Three essays on shame*. Freud Museum, London, 2005. Courtesy of Penny Siopis and the Freud Museum.

opposite of dignity. Shame is visceral, and risks the collapse of ego-boundaries in the relationship between subject and object, self and other. Self turns inside out, exposed for all to see. Yet shame seems necessary for the constitution of the self. Freud (1905:192) observed that “small children are essentially without shame, and at some periods of their earliest years show an unmistakable satisfaction in exposing their bodies, with especial emphasis on the sexual parts”. For Freud, in their sense of omnipotence and cruelty, small children have little capacity to identify, to empathise, to sympathise with the other. Such cruelty “comes easily to the childish nature, since the obstacle that brings the instinct for mastery to a halt at another person's pain – namely a capacity for pity – is developed relatively late” (Freud 1905:192-193). For Charles Rycroft (1995:165), if faced, “shaming experiences increase insight and self-awareness”.

Baubo captivated my imagination. Her apotropaic act invoked other provocative images. Her grin resonated with Helene Cixious's *Laugh of the medusa* (1975), her intimate morphology smacked of the famous “two lips” of Luce Irigaray in *This sex which is not one* (1977). Baubo's cheekiness found a home in Sarah Lucas's photograph, *Chicken Knickers* (1997). Henri Charcot's famous hysterics of the late nineteenth-century also sprung to mind, lifting their skirts, baring their breasts, freezing in gestures understood by many feminists as resistance to patriarchal power. Closer to home, an incident in 1990 in which a group of black women from Soweto stripped in front of apartheid policeman to protest the forced removals of their homes also struck a chord.

My exhibition took the form of three interventions or ‘essays’: one in Freud's study, another in his dining room, and a third in the exhibition room, formerly his bedroom.

### Essay one: The study

Freud's study is like a deep, red cave. His couch dominates symbolically if not physically. The room is haunted by the spectre of the ageing, ill Freud suffering stoically with cancer in his mouth. Could his malignant mouth have been a source of shame for him? He was, after all, deeply disturbed at his beloved dog Lün turning away from him to avoid the stench emanating from his mouth as he moved to pat his pet.

I was also very aware of how the study had been disrupted by artists Sophie Calle and Sarah Lucas

in their earlier exhibitions in the museum. I did not want to disrupt so much as to intensify the interaction of the psychological and social in the study. The best approach seemed through the disembodied sound of human voices – a perfect way to fill a space. It would also evoke the talking cure. For this I recorded and looped the voices of seven well-known South Africans speaking of their experiences of public and/or private shame. They reflected in different ways on the shame of being a victim of racial oppression, of belonging to the ‘group’ of white oppressors, of sexual exploitation of women and children, of torture, of the stigma of AIDS, of the humiliation associated with the aging and diseased body and of personal betrayal. All were willing to be ‘exposed’ because they saw the potential for agency in such exposure, some even seeing it as the cathartic ventilation necessary for social transformation. The voices were those of Edwin Cameron, Fatima Meer, Antjie Krog, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Irene Stephanou, Kgomo Mtsunyane and Paul Verryn.

At the opening of the exhibition, the voices played out as ambient sound; loud, public and intense. The spectator could not look at anything in the study – objects, couch, books – but to the accompaniment of voices pondering shame and so become uncomfortable participant, voyeur or witness. After the opening, the sound became individual and private, each voice heard through individual sets of headphones attached to CD-ROM players on the plinths that cordoned off the couch and antiquities from the spectator's space.

The ritualistic, affect-laden element of the human voice re-iterated repeatedly through looping was important in my choice of sound. The processual nature of medium and mediation, the subtly inflected articulation of pitch, tone, and timbre, the glosses and hesitations in searching for words, were all vital to the intense experience I sought to achieve.

The aural quality of the scenario seemed reminiscent of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings that began in 1996. These hearings – however painful and unfulfilling – made it possible for some South Africans to imagine new forms of agency, social justice, and the prospect of moving on. The TRC also dramatised how shame could be entangled with guilt. The relation between the two is complex. For psychologist Erik Erikson, shame comes before guilt. Writing on shame, Kalu Singh (2002:157, emphasis added) notes that Erikson,





**Fig. 5.** Siopis, P. 2005. One of the cupboards in Freud's dining room. Detail of site-specific installation *Three essays on shame*. 2005. Photograph by Rose Jones. Courtesy of Penny Siopis and the Freud Museum.

pairs [shame] with 'doubt', and contrasts them both with 'autonomy', the attainment of a sense of integrity, skill and self-sufficient power with regard to bodily functions of eating and excretion. Shame is the sensation consequent upon the *exposure of failed autonomy* or hubris.

For Erikson, "visual shame predates auditory guilt, which is a sense of badness to be had all by oneself when nobody watches and when everything is quiet except the voice of the superego". Asserting the viscosity of the voice in the installation, for me at least, made palpable and concrete the experience of shame meeting guilt.

### Essay two: The dining room

Freud's dining room became Baubo's room. She never had a place on Freud's desk or in his cabinet of treasured things, so I displayed her as the room's centrepiece in her own glass case. The room is filled with nineteenth-century, hand-painted cupboards which I flung open and filled with various things, including newspaper cuttings, film, documents, photographs, other people's artworks, *objets trouvés* and my own crafted artefacts. Many of these things related to racial and sexual violence in South Africa which involved shame. The contents included:

- a newspaper photograph of a naked black man painted completely silver in order to shame him for stealing
- material on Sarah Baartman whose genitals were referred to as her 'veil of shame' in the literature of the time
- photographs and a cartoon reflecting the 'black vagina' controversy sparked by an artwork by Kaolin Thomson shown on a student exhibition at the University of the Witwatersand in 1996. The artwork was a small ashtray – a vagina – sporting a *Gaulois Blonde* cigarette. It provoked a debate about representation that went all the way to parliament.
- reproductions of a photograph of a nineteenth-century hermaphrodite sourced from one of Freud's books
- a copy of Jeffrey Eugenides' book *Middlesex*
- a copy of the South African feminist journal *Agenda* opened at an article titled 'What do Zulu

girls have?' which dealt with the sometimes anxious shame-laden naming of female genitals in Zulu culture

- two small plastic shapes which 'grow' in water which I use refer to the South African urban legend of *Pinky Pinky*; a trans-sexual, 'poly-racial' creature that terrorises prepubescent girls on their visits to school toilets
- a crafted vagina on doll's legs reminiscent of the Baubo illustrated in Freud's 1916 case-study of an obsessive patient
- a Princess Diana-like doll lifting her skirt on a replica of Buckingham palace
- two open books placed side by side – one showing a reproduction of Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866) and the other Sarah Lucas's photograph *Chicken Knickers*
- a *jenny haviner* – a flattened skate fish from the depths of the ocean artfully manipulated by sailors to look like a grotesque female body
- hundreds of false eyes
- a monitor screening a short documentary *To Walk Naked/Uku Hamba 'Ze* (Meintjies, Maingard & Thompson 1995) referred to earlier, in which women from Soweto strip in front of policemen to shame them, and in so doing, stop them destroying their homes. The film includes interviews with the women, all of who reflect on both the power and the pain of their acts of self-exposure.
- an array of Baubo replicas and other monstrous things.

All this material spoke to the boundary between reality and fantasy, and involved phantasmagoric projections connecting with the psycho-social state of shame. Neither labeled nor categorised, these objects 'floated' and associated freely like so many of the more arcane objects in Freud's collection.

### Essay three: The exhibition room

I restored the upstairs exhibition room to its original function as Freud's bedroom by moving his deathbed – which looked uncannily like his couch – from the attic into the centre of the room. In Freud's last days,

the threat of London being bombed prompted his family to move his bed onto the ground floor and into the study. So he did not die in his bedroom, but in his study, surrounded by his beloved objects.

I hung a series of my ‘shame’ paintings in a low, continuous frieze around the room. The paintings are small and intimate imaginings of childhood sexuality and dread. Imagining in this way in paint can be disturbing as it materialises invisible or even unthinkable sensations, something like my sense of Freud’s controversial seduction theory, where the boundary between fantasy and reality become profoundly contested.

The paintings evoke childhood hurt and exposure as much through iconography as materiality, especially surface. The words in these paintings are from craft industry rubber stamps of sentimental, clichéd love-talk. Stamped into the paint surface these sweet phrases turn sour, ironical, perhaps more true-to-life. When repeated they hark back to the hysteric’s incessant reiteration of the language of trauma. The often mannered gestures of some figures are also

suggestive of the clichéd body language we might read as shameful. Hanging our heads in shame would be one such gesture.

I pick up here on the question of iconography, materiality and surface in painting particularly. In my experience, an over-developed attention to iconography over materiality tends to follow conventional symbolic reading of paintings too rigidly. I touch briefly now on the significance of painterly process. Many of the ‘shame’ paintings begin as ‘blots’; formless, splashes, drips and drags of coloured liquid that run, pool and congeal. This raw, clotted, liquid matter is open-form, and invites entangled thoughts and feelings. Paint becomes a kind of physical emanation and a ‘ground’ for me, touching on something quite primary. In these works the initially amorphous, liquid form sets conditions for figuring unspeakable things. Shame is a sensation as much as it is an image.

Shame is a sensation as much as it is an image. Space can be shameful too. Placed in a room whose purpose is exhibition, private things on display can often

elicit the feeling of exposure in the spectator. For me, Freud’s stark deathbed evokes a sense of shame. However much it is dressed up in rich ornamental brocade, the bed retains the stark truth that all bodies will die and decay in time. More importantly in this context, is the potentially shameful exposure of the body after death. Raw indignity threatens the body as leftover, and troubles us in life. How will our remains be seen just after we die? We can only imagine our final self-shame in death, and rely on the kindness of others to deliver us from post-mortem shaming.

In South Africa the word ‘shame’ is colloquially an expression of sympathy for, and identification with, someone else’s pain, usually public. If you fall in the street, people might exclaim ‘shame’ or ‘sorry’, even though they are clearly blameless. That a person might feel shame on behalf of another is about empathy. In her recording which played in the study, Antjie Krog echoed something Jacqueline Rose says, which brings us back to Baubo: that is, that “shame requires an audience” (Krog 2005). Baubo did after all, engage with Demeter, and the story of that engagement requires readers, spectators. Shame is a form of human relating.

To end, I return to the question of practice-led research. I emphasised that my Freud project involved a dynamic relationship between practice and theory, making and writing, which was alive and fertile. To keep this aliveness, this openness, remains a challenge to me, and I suggest, for PLR. Here I see it as crucial to resist the over-valuing of a theoretical approach which reduces and instrumentalises the material experience of the work or the practice, as much as it is to resist the over fetishisation of art practice which so often degenerates into a kind of retrograde formalism. Openness to theory as well as the intense particularities of form, of materiality, are vital to any worthwhile notion of PLR. A core challenge here is to develop new forms of attentiveness to the specificity of the work or practice in all its embodied particularity and to theorise these forms in imaginative ways. Clearly there are a number of arguments being compressed here, and fuller discussion would need a separate paper. Nevertheless, theory as an alibi for practice, mobilised to fit practice into some orthodox notion of research, is a dead-end. And this is the risk of PLR in the university context.

**Fig. 6.** Siopis, P. 2003-2005. ‘Shame’ painting series. Mixed media on paper. 18.5cm x 24.5cm. Courtesy of Penny Siopis and the Freud Museum.



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